VISIT…

From: Roy Willis, ed., WORLD MYTHOLOGY. London: Duncan Baird Editions, 1993

Tibet and Mongolia 102
DR MARTIN BOORD
Myths of Origin/*Radiant, Black Misery and the karmic wind* 104
Myths of the Ancient Kings/*The sky-descended rulers* 105
King Gesar/*The warrior-king* 106
The Taming of the Gods/*The impact of Buddhism* 107
Mongolian Shamanism/*Encounters with the spirit realm* 108

Japan 110
DR C. SCOTT LITTLETON
Izanagi and Izanami/*The primal couple* 112
Amaterasu and Susano/*The contest of the sibling deities* 115
The Divine Crisis/*Amaterasu's removal of the sun* 116
The Izumo Cycle/*Susano's descent to earth; Okuninushi and the White Rabbit* 118
Gods, Heroes and Demons/*Inari, Hachiman and the Oni* 121
The Realm of Saga/*The exploits of Jimmu-tenno and Yamato-takeru* 122
Buddhist Myths/*Three figures of mercy* 123

Greece 124
DR SIMON GOLDHILL
Myth and Society/*Public and private observances* 126
The Birth of the Gods/*The rise of the Olympians* 128
The Origins of Humanity/*Prometheus, Pandora, Deucalion, Pyrrha* 130
Zeus/*King of the gods* 132
The Couplings of Zeus/*Human and divine consorts* 133
Athene/*The virgin goddess* 136
Poseidon/*God of the sea* 137
Apollo/*The brilliant god* 138
Artemis/*Chaste goddess of the hunt* 139
Dionysos/*God of wine and altered states* 140
Goddesses of the Soil/*Demeter and Persephone* 142
Ares and Aphrodite/*War, love and sex* 143
Home, Hearth and Fire/*Hermes, Hestia and Hephaistos* 144
The Underworld/*The kingdom of Hades* 146
Heroes and Monsters/*The world's prodigies* 147
Herakles/*The archetypal hero* 148
Theseus/*Athenian hero and statesman* 150
Jason/*The great adventurer* 152
The Argonauts/*Jason's quest for the Golden Fleece* 154
Perseus/*Slayer of Medusa* 156
The Trojan War/*Homer's warrior epic* 157
After Troy/*Odysseus and Agamemnon* 160
Transgressors/*Breakers of the natural order* 162
Centaurs and Amazons/*Races of fabulous beings* 164
Transformations/*Myths of metamorphosis; Orpheus* 165

Rome 166
DR MARY BEARD
Gods and Goddesses/*The borrowed pantheon; household gods and civic virtues* 168
The Foundation of Rome/*The destiny of Aeneas the Trojan* 172
Romulus and the Kings of Rome/*The she-wolf and the myths of the past* 174

The Celtic World 176
DR JOHN MACINNES
The Celtic Pantheon/*A miscellany of gods* 178
Myths and Gods of Ireland/*The Mythological Cycle* 180
The Hero of Ulster/*Tales of Cú Chulainn* 182
Finn and His Warriors/*The Fenian myths* 184
Goddesses/*Motherhood, war and sovereignty* 186
Otherworldly Voyages/*Conla, Mael Dúin and Bran* 187
Stories of Wales/*The "Mabinogion"* 188
The Arthurian Legend/*Arthur and his knights* 189

Northern Europe 190
DR HILDA ELLIS DAVIDSON
Early and Lost Gods/*Fragments of Northern myth* 192
Cosmology in the Viking Age/*The World Tree and its realms* 193
Loki and Ragnarok/*The trickster, the wolf and the last great battle* 195
Odin/*Ruler of Asgard* 196
Thor/*The thunder god* 198
Freyr and the Vanir/*Gods of sky, land and water* 200
Goddesses and Female Spirits/*Freyja, Golden Apples, Valkyries and Norns* 202
The Dragon-Slayers/*Beowulf and Sigurd* 204

Central and Eastern Europe 206
DR FAITH WIGZELL
The Other World/*The thrice tenth kingdom* 208
The Baba Iaga and the Amazons/*Female creatures of folk tale* 209
Ancestors and Hearth Spirits/*Ivan the Fool and the domovoi* 210
Spirit Souls of the Departed/*The rusalka, vila and other visitors* 211
Malevolent Spirits/*Forest creatures, werewolves and vampires* 212

THIS MATERIAL MAY BE PROTECTED BY COPYRIGHT LAW (TITLE 17 U.S. CODE)

THIS MATERIAL MAY BE PROTECTED BY
COPYRIGHT LAW (TITLE 17 U.S. CODE)

JAPAN

Every Shinto shrine has a simple torii *(gateway) at the entrance to its precincts. This* torii *rising from the sea is linked with the Miyajima shrine near Hiroshima, sacred to the three divine daughters of the storm god Susano.*

Lying off the northeast coast of the Eurasian landmass, from which it is separated by the Tsushima Straits, Japan is at once *in* East Asia, but not really *of* East Asia. Its history, in the strict sense of a literate historical tradition, began late by Western standards: the conventional starting date is 552AD when the king of the Korean kingdom of Paekche (near modern Pusan) sent some Buddhist missionaries to the emperor of Japan as a gesture of good will. At that time, the principal Japanese institution was the *uji*, or clan. Each *uji* seems to have controlled its own territory and to have been composed of both commoners and aristocrats, and almost certainly had its own mythology, which centred on a divine ancestor.

By the beginning of the 6th century, one of these clans (sometimes referred to as the Yamato clan, from the region of central Honshu that still bears this name) had managed to gain effective hegemony over the others – and, by extension, so had its divine ancestors. The imperial family, which has continued in an unbroken line to the present, soon became the primary focus of Japanese myth.

The native religion of Japan, Shinto, is based on the worship of a multitude of gods, spirits and objects of reverence. Its mythology concentrates on tales of the sun goddess Amaterasu and the adventures by which her descendants unified the Japanese people. With the introduction of Buddhism came a period of cultural borrowing, initially from Korea, later from China, the "mother civilization" of East Asia. Buddhism mingled with Shinto in complex ways, but from the 17th century there was a strong Shinto revival, culminating in the adoption of Shinto as state religion under the Meiji government (1868-1912).

SOURCES OF JAPANESE MYTH

The primary source for Japanese mythology, the *Kojiki*, or Record of Ancient Matters, is the oldest surviving imperial genealogy. The final text was compiled by a courtier named Ono Yasumaro from several earlier texts (no longer extant) after receiving a commission from the Empress Gemmei in AD711. The work was formally presented at court four months later, in the first month of AD712. Written in a curious mixture of archaic Japanese and Chinese, the *Kojiki* begins with the creation of the world, the origin of the gods, the divine ancestry of the imperial family, and ends with the death of the Emperor Suiko in AD641.

The second major source is the *Nihonshoki*, or Chronicle of Japan, compiled by several scholars at around the same time as the *Kojiki*, and completed in AD720. Except for its poetry, the *Nihonshoki* is written in classical Chinese and is strongly influenced by Chinese (and Korean) historical and mythological traditions and dynastic chronicles. For this reason, the *Nihonshoki* is, on the whole, less reliable than the *Kojiki* as a source for indigenous myth.

Other sources include the *Kogoshui*, or Gleanings from Ancient Stories (AD807), various *norito* (ancient Shinto prayers), the *fudoki* (8th-century provincial "gazetteers"), and the first great anthology of Japanese poetry, the *Manyoshu* (*c.*AD760).

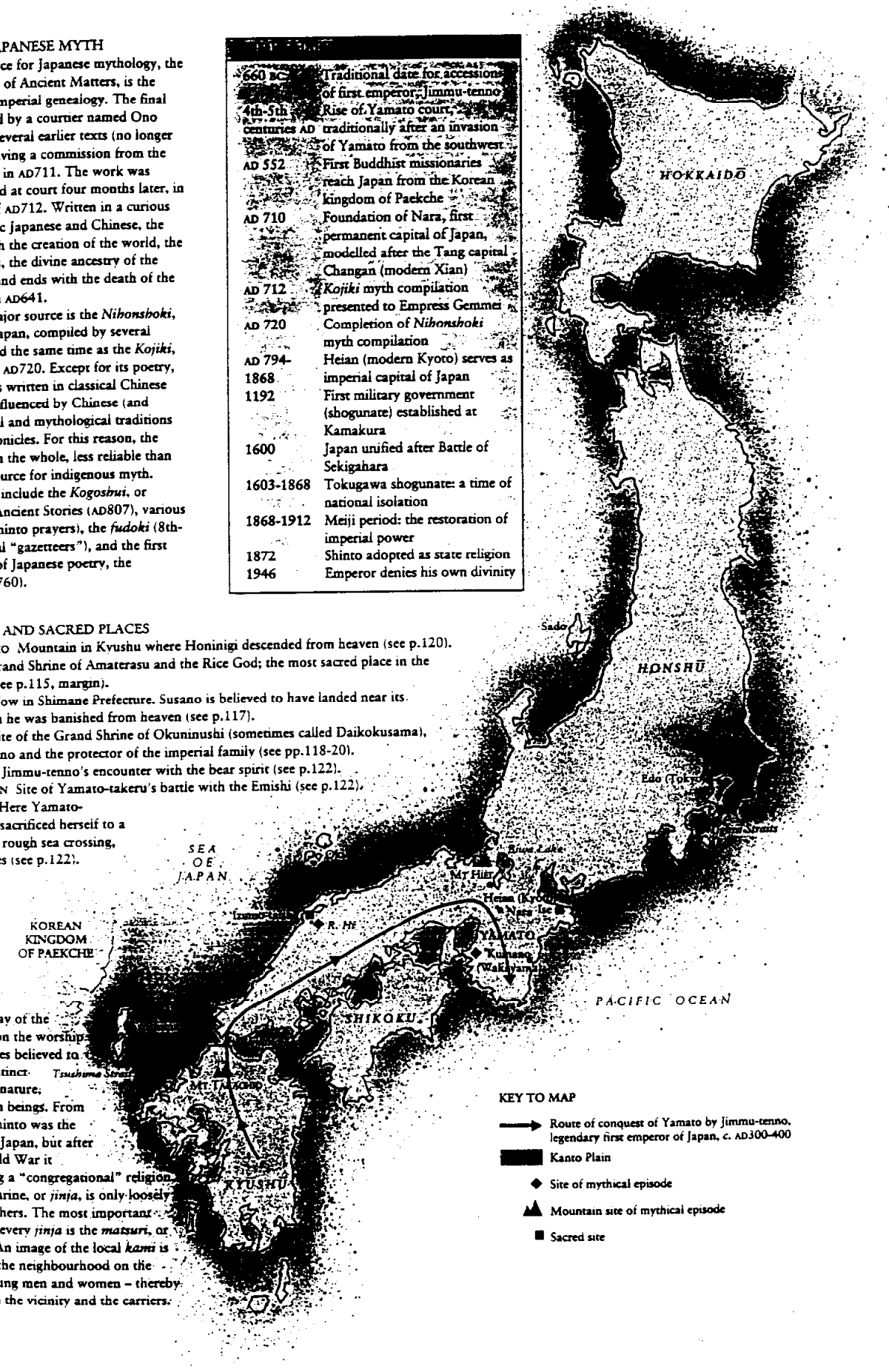
660 BC	Traditional date for accession of first emperor, Jimmu-tenno
4th-5th centuries AD	Rise of Yamato court, traditionally after an invasion of Yamato from the southwest
AD 552	First Buddhist missionaries reach Japan from the Korean kingdom of Paekche
AD 710	Foundation of Nara, first permanent capital of Japan, modelled after the Tang capital Changan (modern Xian)
AD 712	*Kojiki* myth compilation presented to Empress Gemmei
AD 720	Completion of *Nihonshoki* myth compilation
AD 794-1868	Heian (modern Kyoto) serves as imperial capital of Japan
1192	First military government (shogunate) established at Kamakura
1600	Japan unified after Battle of Sekigahara
1603-1868	Tokugawa shogunate: a time of national isolation
1868-1912	Meiji period: the restoration of imperial power
1872	Shinto adopted as state religion
1946	Emperor denies his own divinity

MYTHIC SITES AND SACRED PLACES

MOUNT TAKACHIO Mountain in Kyushu where Honinigi descended from heaven (see p.120).
ISE Site of the Grand Shrine of Amaterasu and the Rice God; the most sacred place in the Shinto religion (see p.115, margin).
THE HI RIVER Now in Shimane Prefecture. Susano is believed to have landed near its headwaters when he was banished from heaven (see p.117).
IZUMO-TAISHA Site of the Grand Shrine of Okuninushi (sometimes called Daikokusama), offspring of Susano and the protector of the imperial family (see pp.118-20).
KUMANO Site of Jimmu-tenno's encounter with the bear spirit (see p.122).
THE KANTO PLAIN Site of Yamato-takeru's battle with the Emishi (see p.122).
URAGA STRAITS Here Yamato-takeru's consort sacrificed herself to a water spirit on a rough sea crossing, to calm the waves (see p.122).

SHINTO

Shinto, "The Way of the Gods", centres on the worship of *kami*, divinities believed to inhabit every distinct phenomenon in nature, including human beings. From 1872 to 1945 Shinto was the state religion of Japan, but after the Second World War it reverted to being a "congregational" religion, in which each shrine, or *jinja*, is only loosely related to the others. The most important annual event at every *jinja* is the *matsuri*, or shrine festival. An image of the local *kami* is carried around the neighbourhood on the shoulders of young men and women – thereby sanctifying both the vicinity and the carriers.



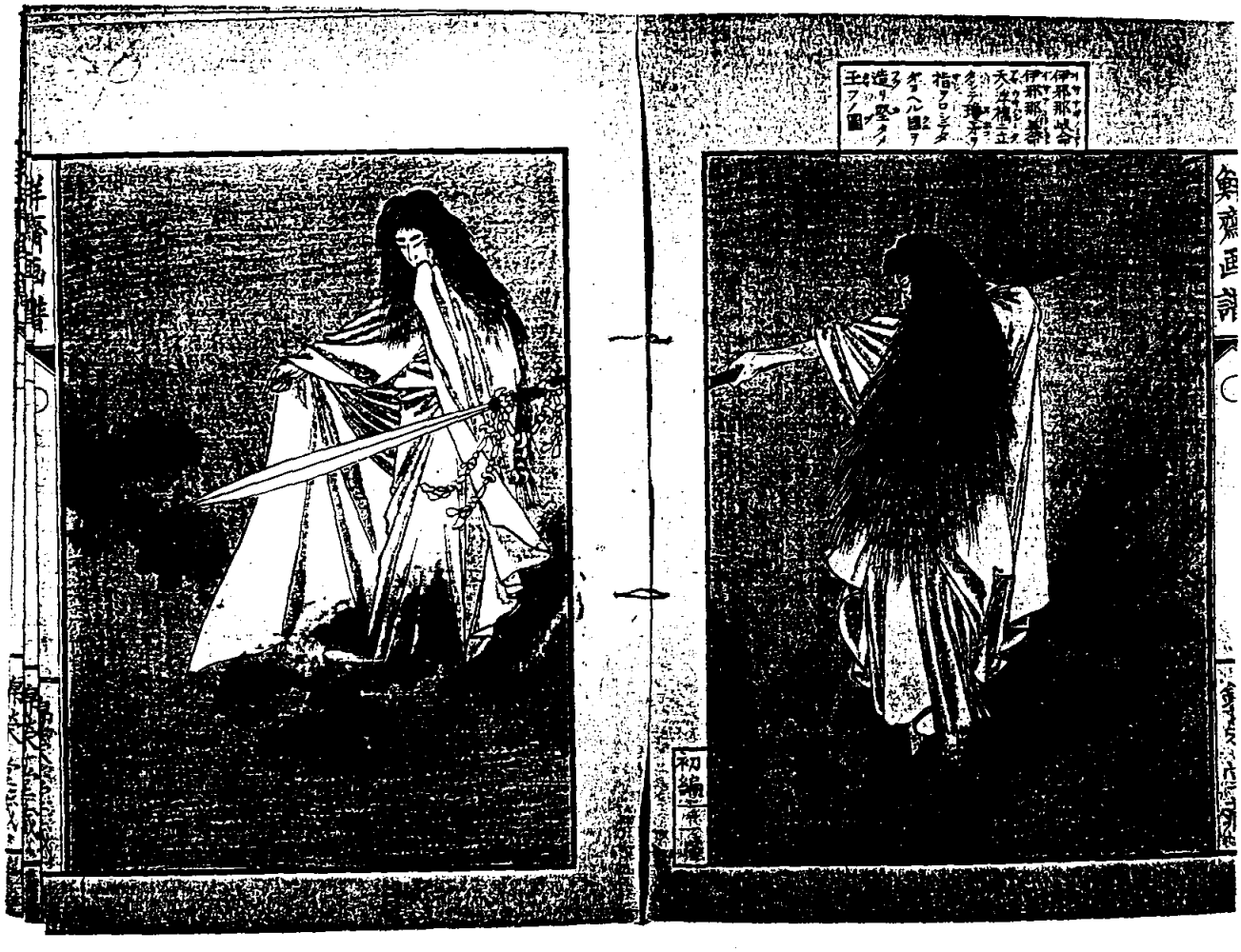
IZANAGI AND IZANAMI

The primal couple

In the beginning, when the earth was young and not yet fully formed (the *Kojiki* describes it as "resembling floating oil and drifting like a jellyfish"), three invisible gods came into existence in what the Japanese call Takamagahara, or the "High Plains of Heaven". The oldest was called Amanominakanushi-no-kami, or "Lord of the Centre of Heaven". He was soon followed by Takamimusubi and Kamimusubi, both of whom were powerful *kami* in their own right. These three, together with two lesser divinities (Umashiashikabihikoji-no-kami and Amanotokotachi-no-kami), formed the five primordial "Separate Heavenly Deities". Then came seven more generations of "heavenly" gods and goddesses, culminating with the Japanese primal couple: Izanagi and his sister and wife, Izanami, in full Izanagi-no-Mikoto ("The August Male") and Izanami-no-Mikoto ("The August Female").

Commanded by the deities to "complete and solidify this drifting land", Izanagi and Izanami stood on the Floating Bridge of Heaven (perhaps a rainbow) and stirred the brine below with a jewelled spear. When they lifted up the spear, the drops formed an island called Onogoro, the first solid land. Shortly afterwards, they descended to the new island, erected a

This 19th-century print shows Izanagi and Izanami with the jewelled spear on the Floating Bridge of Heaven. They were the eighth pair of divinities to appear after the creation of heaven and earth out of the primordial chaos.



"heavenly" pillar and built a palace. Then they decided to procreate. Izanagi asked his sister how her body was formed. She replied that in one place it was formed insufficiently. Izanagi said that one place in his own body was formed to excess, and suggested that they unite these two parts. The divine couple invented a marriage ritual which consisted of them both walking around the heavenly pillar, Izanagi from the left and his sister from the right. When they met, the two exchanged compliments and then had sexual intercourse.

In due course Izanami gave birth, but their first-born turned out to be the deformed Hiruko ("Leech-Child": see right), which the unhappy couple placed in a reed boat and consigned to the sea. During a "grand divination", the gods concluded that the birth of the leech-child was the fault of Izanami, because she had spoken first during the courtship ritual. Armed with this information (which serves to this day to legitimize sexual inequalities in Japan), the couple returned to Onogoro and performed the ritual again. This time Izanagi spoke first when they met at the column, and Izanami duly gave birth in abundance. First, she produced a series of islands (that is, the Japanese archipelago), then a series of gods and goddesses, including the gods of wind, of mountains and of trees. But during the birth of Kagutsuchi (or Homusubi), the Fire God, her genitals were so badly burned that she fell sick and died. However, even in her death throes Izanami continued to engender deities – in her faeces, urine and vomit. Izanagi was inconsolable at her loss, and as he wept, his tears gave rise to yet more deities. Later, his sadness gave way to a terrible rage, and he decapitated the Fire God for causing the death of his beloved wife. From the dead Fire God's remains emerged yet another set of divinities.

Izanagi decided to visit Yomi, the underworld land of the dead (see panel, below), in an attempt to bring Izanami back to life. When Izanami appeared at the entrance to Yomi shrouded in shadows, Izanagi greeted his wife warmly and begged her to return with him. She agreed to discuss his request with the gods in the underworld, and before withdrawing into the darkness she warned her husband not to look at her. But Izanagi was consumed with such a strong desire to see his beloved that he broke off a tooth from the comb which he wore in his left hair-bunch and lit it to make a torch. He entered the land of the dead and saw at once that Izanami was

THE LEECH-CHILD

The idea that a deformed first child (or set of twins) may be unworthy, and for this reason should be abandoned to die, has many resonances in world mythology. Similar circumstances occur in many stories, including those of Moses, Perseus (see p.156) and Romulus and Remus (see p.174). It is possible that the story of the leech-child born to Izanagi and Izanami reflects an ancient Japanese ritual in which the birth of a first child was marked by putting a clay figurine in a reed boat and floating it away as a scapegoat.

The Land of Darkness: the Japanese underworld

The subterranean world of the dead is known also as the Land of Darkness (Yomi-tsu-kuni), the Land of Roots and the Deep Land.

The description of Yomi given in the *Kojiki* may reflect the late prehistoric Japanese practice of burying the dead in stone-lined chambers deep within large tumuli (or *kofun*). Izanagi's expedient of rolling a large boulder across the entrance to Yomi perhaps echoes the final sealing of such a tomb. The boulder may also be a metaphor for the insurmountable barrier between life and death.

There are striking similarities between this story and two well-known Greek myths: the story of Persephone (see p.142), whose ingestion of pomegranate seeds in Hades ties her to the land of the dead in winter, and the story of Orpheus' attempt to rescue his beloved Eurydice from the same realm (p.165).

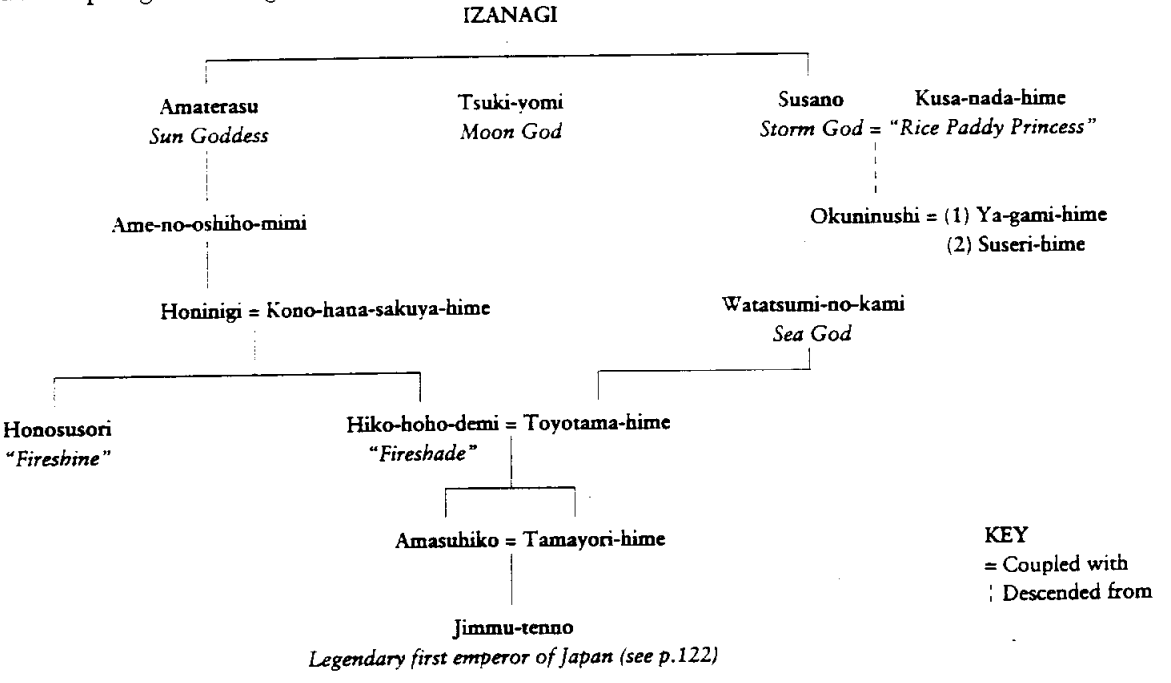
Whether elements of these Greek myths somehow diffused to ancient Japan, or whether the parallels reflect a universal tendency in human myth-making, is disputed by scholars. In many cultures eating the food of the dead is said to create a bond with them. When Izanami meets her husband at the entrance to the land of the dead, she wishes that he had come sooner because she has already "eaten at the hearth" there. This act may explain her dramatic transformation from loving wife into raging demon.

a rotting, maggot-riddled corpse. Terrified at the sight of her, Izanagi turned and fled. Izanami, outraged by Izanagi's betrayal of her wishes, sent the evil "hags of Yomi" to pursue him, followed by the eight thunder deities and a horde of warriors. When he reached the pass of Yomi, which led back to the land of the living, Izanagi found three peaches with which he pelted his pursuers, forcing them to retreat. Finally, Izanami, now a fully-fledged demon, joined the pursuit herself, but before she could reach him, Izanagi closed the pass with a huge boulder. The two faced each other on either side of the boulder and "broke their troth".

Feeling polluted by his experience in Yomi, Izanagi decided to purify himself in the time-honoured Japanese way: by taking a bath. Arriving at the mouth of a small stream in Hyuga (northeast Kyushu), he disrobed. A variety of gods and goddesses were born from his discarded clothing, and others emerged as he bathed. Finally, Izanagi gave birth to three of the most important divinities in the Shinto pantheon: the Sun Goddess, Amaterasu-no-mikoto (literally, "August Person who Makes the Heavens Shine") appeared when he washed his left eye; Tsuki-yomi-no-mikoto ("The August Moon") came out of his right eye; and Susano-no-mikoto ("The August Raging Male") emerged from his nose. Surveying his three noble children, Izanagi decided to divide his kingdom among them. He gave his sacred bead necklace, a symbol of sovereignty, to Amaterasu, with the injunction that she should rule the High Plains of Heaven. To one son, the Moon God Tsuki-yomi (in Japanese mythology the moon is seen, unusually, as male), Izanagi entrusted the realms of the night. To the other son, Susano, he assigned the rule of the ocean.

Amaterasu and Tsuki-yomi obediently accepted their assignments. Susano, however, wept and howled. When Izanagi asked him the cause of his distress, Susano replied that he did not want to rule the waters but wished instead to go to the land of his mother Izanami. Angered by Susano's defiance, Izanagi banished him and then withdrew, his divine mission completed. According to one version of the myth, he ascended to heaven, where he lives to this day in the "Younger Palace of the Sun". He is also said to be enshrined at Taga (in Shiga Prefecture, Honshu).

The offspring of Izanagi



AMATERASU AND SUSANO

The contest of the sibling deities

When the Storm God Susano was banished by his father, Izanagi, he announced his intention to take leave of his sister, the Sun Goddess, Amaterasu. The goddess suspected her brother of wanting to usurp her lands and prepared herself for battle, arranging her long hair in bunches and arming herself with a bow and two quivers of arrows. She shook her bow furiously and stamped and kicked the earth beneath her feet while she waited for him. Susano assured her he had no evil intentions. He suggested that they could prove which of them was mightier by having a contest of reproduction: whichever of them bore male deities would be vindicated.

The contest began with the Sun Goddess asking for her brother's sword. She broke this into three pieces which she chewed up and then spat out as three graceful goddesses. Next, Susano took the long strings of *magatama*, or fertility beads, which Amaterasu wore around her hair-bunches, hair-band and arms. From these he produced five male gods and proclaimed himself the victor. Amaterasu pointed out that her brother's male offspring had come from her possessions and that in fact *she* had won the contest. Susano refused to concede and celebrated his victory by breaking down the ridges of the divine rice paddies and covering up the irrigation ditches. Then he defecated and strewed his excrement in the hall where it was customary to taste the first fruits of the harvest. Finally, Susano skinned a "heavenly" dappled pony (probably a reference to the stars) and hurled it down through the thatched roof of the sacred weaving hall (see panel, below), where Amaterasu and her maidens were weaving. One of the maidens was so alarmed by this that she banged her genitals against the shuttle of the loom and died. Amaterasu fled in terror. The *Nihonshoki* includes a version of this story in which Amaterasu herself was the victim of her brother's violent prank, although she was merely injured, not killed.

THE SUN GODDESS

The Sun Goddess Amaterasu, the elder daughter of Izanagi, is one of the greatest deities in Japanese myth. She was born out of her father's left eye as he washed after returning from Yomi, the underworld. Amaterasu is worshipped both as a spiritual divinity and as a sacred ancestor of the imperial family. She was once worshipped in the imperial palace itself, until it became politically expedient to put the authority of the emperor beyond the power of the priestesses and erect a shrine to her elsewhere. The main shrine to Amaterasu is at Ise, in Mie Prefecture. This is the most important Shinto shrine in Japan. The main building is a thatched, unpainted hut of cypress, constructed in ancient Japanese style. It is regularly rebuilt in wood in exactly the same form: from the 7th century to the 17th century it was rebuilt every twenty years; since the 17th century it has been rebuilt every twenty-one years.

The sacred weaving hall

Neither the Kojiki *nor the* Nihonshoki *is precise as to the purpose of the sacred weaving hall, or what indeed Amaterasu and her maidens were weaving. However, several possibilities have been suggested.*

Amaterasu was a priestess-queen, responsible for weaving the clothes of the gods, and the weaving hall may have been her workroom. Some authorities suggest that she and her female attendants were making garments to be worn by priestesses officiating at ceremonies connected with the sun cult. A more profound possibility is the notion that they were weaving the fabric of the still incomplete universe. Susano's actions can perhaps be seen as a chaotic assault upon the cosmos or universal order. The sacred weaving hall, as a scene of creation, would be a fitting arena for the confrontation between the divine embodiments of cosmos (Amaterasu) and chaos (Susano).

A 19th-century print of Amaterasu and some of her handmaidens in divine splendour.

THE DIVINE CRISIS

Amaterasu's removal of the sun

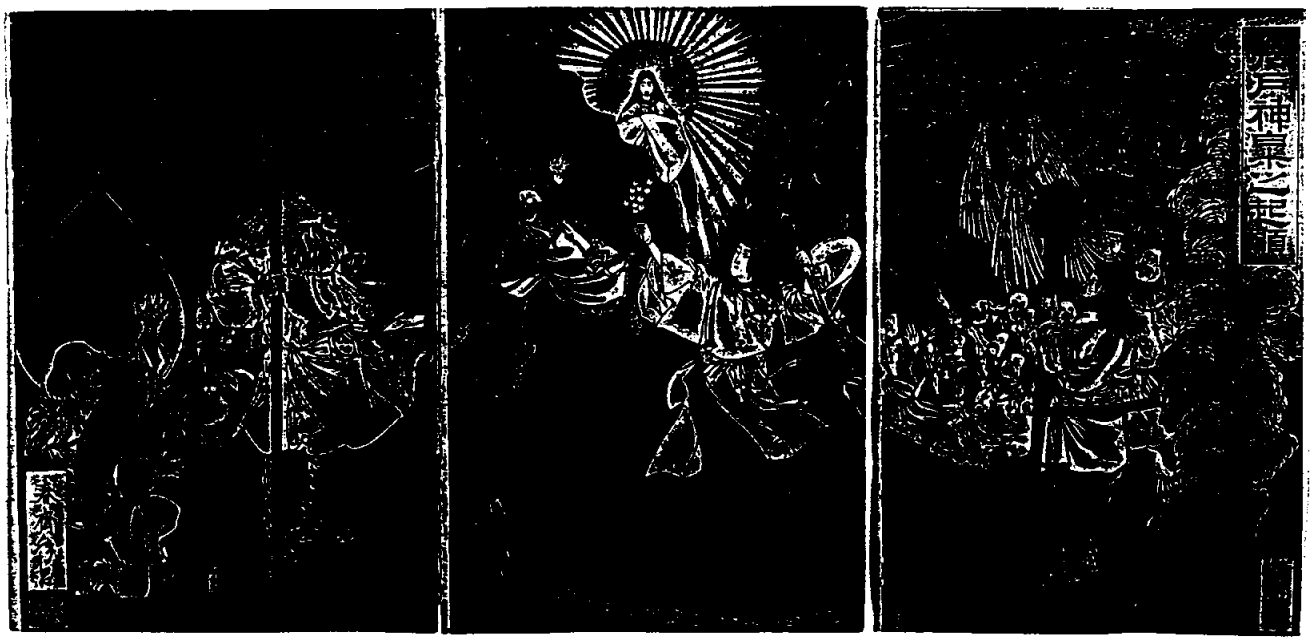
THE DAWN GODDESS
In her capacity as a prototype of the female shaman, or *miko*, who regularly engaged in ecstatic dancing, Ama-no-uzume, the dawn goddess, appears again later in the story as told by the *Nihonshoki*. On this occasion she displays her charms in order to distract a local solar deity called Sarutahiko, or the "Monkey Prince", who had attempted to block the descent from heaven of Amaterasu's grandson, Honinigi. She and Sarutahiko eventually married, and from their union is said to have sprung an historically attested clan of female Heian court dancers called the Sarume.

The Sun Goddess Amaterasu was badly frightened when her brother Susano hurled a skinned horse through the roof of the sacred weaving hall (see p.115). Her decision to withdraw into what the *Kojiki* calls the "Heavenly Rock Cave" (or Ama-no-iwato) produced a divine crisis analogous to the crises found in almost every ancient mythology, such as the Egyptian account of the temporary triumph of the evil god Seth (see p.44) and the Greek myth of the abduction of Persephone (see p.142), both of which caused all manner of disasters to befall the world. Some scholars interpret her withdrawal as a symbolic death and entombment; however, it may equally be a metaphor for a total eclipse of the sun, precipitated by the event that the Sun Goddess had just witnessed.

Amaterasu's self-imposed retirement plunged both the High Plains of Heaven and the Central Land of the Reed Plain (that is, the mortal realm) into total darkness. As a result, the rice paddies lay fallow, and various calamities ensued. In desperation, the "eight-hundred myriad" gods came together in solemn assembly by the heavenly river to discuss ways of coaxing Amaterasu from her hiding place. (In this context, the Japanese number eight, or *ya*, is a sacred number, implying many or an entire contingent rather than a specific total.)

Omori-kane-no-kami, the wise son of Takamimusubi, was directed to come up with a solution. After the sounds of certain "long-crying" birds (probably roosters) failed to produce the desired result, Omori-kane and his fellow divinities conceived an elaborate stratagem. First, they constructed a magical mirror which they suspended from the branches of a sacred sakaki tree uprooted from a mountain forest. Then, while several divinities held magical objects and performed a solemn liturgy, a beautiful young goddess called Ama-no-uzume (in this context seemingly a dawn goddess, like the Roman Aurora, the Greek Eos or the Vedic Indian Ushas, although none of the ancient sources actually characterize her in this way) climbed on top of an overturned tub and performed an erotic dance.

Amaterasu emerging from her cave, thereby restoring sunlight to the world, as depicted in a 19th-century print triptych. Some scholars have interpreted this event as the return of spring after the darkness of winter. This would make the erotic dance in front of the cave, which leads to Amaterasu's emergence from hiding, a kind of fertility ritual. However, others think the episode is derived from observation of a solar eclipse.



Ama-no-uzume's aim was to trick the sun into re-emerging, by employing methods consistent with those of the ancient *miko*, or female shaman. When she exposed her breasts and pushed her skirt down to her genitals, the assembled gods laughed so uproariously that the High Plains of Heaven shook as if struck by an earthquake. The sound even penetrated to where Amaterasu was hiding. Her curiosity aroused by the commotion, she opened the door of the rock-cave by just a crack and called out: "Why is Ama-no-uzume singing and dancing, and all the eight-hundred myriad deities laughing?" The young goddess replied for them all: "We are rejoicing because here is a deity superior to you." While she was speaking, two gods aimed the mirror in the direction of the partially open door and another god, whose name includes the word for strength (*chikana*), concealed himself nearby.

Catching sight of her reflection, Amaterasu slowly came out of her refuge and approached the mirror. As she gazed intently at herself, the god who was in hiding nearby suddenly grabbed her by the hand and pulled her all the way out. Another divinity stretched a magic rope (*shiru-kume*) across the doorway, saying: "This is as far as you may go!" Things rapidly returned to normal after this, and the sunlight returned to both heaven and earth. The divine crisis had been resolved.

The eight-hundred myriad deities then reassembled to deliberate over the fate of the one who had caused the crisis, the wilful and destructive Susano. The punishment imposed on him was severe: the gods fined him "a thousand tables of restitutive gifts", cut off his beard and the nails of his hands and feet, and finally expelled him from heaven, forcing him to descend once more to the Land of the Reed Plain.

Susano and the Food Goddess

Susano, the God of Storms, was consistently a source of mayhem. Before his banishment to the Central Land of the Reed Plain, Susano's troublesome disposition brought him into conflict with almost everyone who crossed his path. According to some sources, one such unfortunate was the Food Goddess, Ogetsu-no-hime.

In an incident unrelated to the main narrative, Susano is said to have ordered Ogetsu to give him something to eat. She responded to this demand in an unusual manner not at all to his liking – that is, by withdrawing the food from her nose, mouth and rectum. In retaliation for this perceived insult, he slew her.

However, the death of Ogetsu serves a positive purpose in Japanese myth. Her body parts yielded the basic food crops on which the Japanese still subsist: in her eyes grew rice seeds; in her ears, millet; in her genitals, wheat; in her nose, red beans; and, in her rectum, soy beans.

This story recalls the ancient Chinese myth of Pan Gu (see p.90), a primordial giant whose remains became the raw material of creation, including foodstuffs: his skin and hair became plants and trees. However, most scholars believe that the Ogetsu story pre-dates the beginning of intense Chinese influence on Japan in the 6th century AD. In fact, the Japanese account of the Food Goddess's fate is curiously similar to an Indonesian myth in which a goddess called Hainuwele was wrongfully slain and dismembered; her body parts were subsequently buried, and from them, it is said, emerged the staple food plants (for example, yams) which are cultivated in that part of the world. There may be a very ancient link between Ogetsu and Hainuwele, both tales deriving ultimately from a common Southeast Asian prototype.

In the *Nihonshoki*, the slayer of the Food Goddess is given as Tsuki-yomi, the Moon God, rather than Susano. When Tsuki-yomi reported what he had done to the Sun Goddess, Amaterasu, she rebuked him, vowing never to set eyes on him again. That is why the sun and the moon dwell apart from each other. Several authorities suggest that this version of the story is the more ancient one, and that the compiler of the *Kojiki* substituted Susano for Tsuki-yomi in order to underscore the god's violent nature.

THE IZUMO CYCLE

Susano's descent to earth; Okuninushi and the White Rabbit

The Storm God Susano with his wife, Kusa-nada-hime, whom the god turned into a comb to save her from an eight-headed dragon.

After his banishment from heaven, Susano went down to earth to the land of Izumo (see map, p.111). His first adventure there forms a bridge passage to a distinct group of myths set in this region and known as the Izumo Cycle. The character central to the cycle is the region's principal divinity, Okuninushi (or Daikokusama), the "Great Lord of the Country", who was the descendant of Susano and Kusa-nada-hime, possibly their son (see family tree, p.114).

The exiled Susano found himself near the headwaters of the Hi River. Noticing a pair of wooden chop-sticks floating in a stream, he reasoned that there must be people living up-river, and so he set out to find them. He soon encountered an elderly couple and a beautiful young woman, all weeping bitterly. The couple told the god that an eight-tailed, eight-headed creature called Yamato-no-orochi had devoured seven of their eight daughters, and that the monster was about to take their youngest offspring, Kusa-nada-hime ("Rice Paddy Princess") as well. The god revealed his identity and offered to slay the dragon in return for Kusa-nada-hime's hand in marriage. When the couple readily agreed, he turned the princess into a comb, which he inserted into one of his hair-bunches. Then he instructed them to fill eight large tubs with *sake* (rice wine) and to place these on eight platforms surrounded by a fence with eight openings.

Yamato-no-orochi eventually arrived, stuck his eight heads through the openings and began to lap up the *sake*. Susano waited until the creature was dead drunk before coming out of hiding and hacking it to pieces with his sword. In the course of chopping up the middle tail, he discovered inside it the famous sword that would later be named Kusanagi, or "Grass Mower" (see p.122). Then he changed Kusa-nada-hime back to her human form, married her, and built a large palace at Suga in Izumo.

The most famous story in the Izumo Cycle is that of Okuninushi and the White Rabbit. Okuninushi had eighty brothers, all of whom wished to marry the beautiful princess Ya-gami-hime of Inaba. One day the brothers set out for Inaba to woo the princess, with Okuninushi bringing up the rear as their attendant. On the journey they came upon a rabbit without fur lying by the side of the road, obviously in great pain. The brothers told the suffering creature that he might get his fur back if he bathed in salt water, but this remedy only made his condition worse.

Okuninushi eventually arrived on the scene and asked the rabbit why he was crying. The rabbit replied that he had been on the island of Oki and had wanted to cross over to Izumo, but there was no bridge. He had persuaded a family of crocodiles to form a living bridge across the water. In return for this favour he had promised to count the number of crocodiles lying end-to-end as he ran over them and thereby determine whether they or the creatures of the sea were more numerous. But a few bounds short of the end of the living bridge the rabbit had revealed that his promise was a ruse, intended solely to get him across the water. Enraged, the crocodile lying at the end of the chain had seized the foolish rabbit and skinned him alive.

Okuninushi told the rabbit to go to the river-mouth and wash himself in the pure water. Then he was to roll on ground sprinkled with the pollen of kama grass. The rabbit, who was actually a deity, did as he was instructed, and his snow-white fur soon returned. Okuninushi was rewarded for his help by the grateful rabbit, who assured him that he and not any of his brothers would gain the hand of Ya-gami-hime. The eighty

The ordeals of Okuninushi

Okuninushi's union with Ya-gami-hime provoked several murderous attacks on the young god by his eighty jealous brothers. His attempt to resolve the dispute involved him in an even more deadly conflict with the mighty Storm God, Susano.

On two separate occasions the vengeful brothers succeeded in killing their sibling, only to find him restored on both occasions by his mother who interceded with the gods on his behalf. The brothers first heated a large rock to white-hot intensity and rolled it down a mountain toward him. Thinking that it was a boar which his brothers wanted him to stop, Okuninushi caught the rock and was burned to death. The second attempt involved the brothers crushing Okuninushi to death in the fork of a large tree. After this experience Okuninushi, urged on by his worried mother, decided to put an end to the rivalry by seeking the counsel of Susano, the Storm God, who now lived in the underworld.

Upon his arrival at Susano's palace, Okuninushi noticed the beautiful Suseri-hime, Susano's daughter. She and Okuninushi fell deeply in love and were soon married. However, this impetuous act angered Susano, and he too decided to do away with Okuninushi. Feigning acceptance of his new son-in-law, he bade him sleep in a room that turned out to be full of snakes. Fortunately, Okuninushi's bride gave him a magic scarf that drove off the snakes when it was waved at them three times. The next night, when Susano told Okuninushi to sleep in a room full of centipedes and bees, the scarf saved him again.

Finally, his angry father-in-law shot an arrow into a large plain and instructed Okuninushi to fetch it. The young god did as he was told, but no sooner had he begun his search than Susano set fire to the grass growing in the plain. Okuninushi looked in vain for a way out of the inferno until a mouse came to his rescue. The mouse told the anxious god to stamp his feet, because the ground was hollow. Okuninushi took the advice of the mouse, stamped his feet and a hole opened up. He took refuge in the hole while the fire passed over him harmlessly. Meanwhile, the mouse had searched for and found the arrow, which he gave to Okuninushi.

Okuninushi returned the arrow to Susano, who now began to feel a little more kindly disposed toward his son-in-law. All the same, Okuninushi made plans to escape from the older god's sphere of influence. One day, after Okuninushi had washed Susano's hair, the Storm God fell asleep. Seizing his opportunity, Okuninushi tied the slumbering Susano's hair to the rafters of the palace. Then, armed with his father-in-law's mighty bow and sword, and carrying Suseri-hime on his back, Okuninushi left Susano's underworld palace and set out for his own country, the Land of the Reed Plain.

It was only when Okuninushi had gone some distance that Susano started off in pursuit of his daughter's abductor. When he came within shouting distance of the fleeing couple, at the border of the underworld and the land of the living, Susano decided not to follow the happy pair. Instead, he shouted to Okuninushi the advice he had sought in the first place: how to end the quarrel with his brothers. The Storm God told him that he would defeat his brothers if he fought them with the bow and sword which he had taken from his palace.

brothers were furious at Okuninushi's success, and the struggles between Okuninushi and his jealous brothers are the basis for a number of other stories (see panel, p.119). These conflicts, in which Okuninushi was victorious, reduced Izumo to anarchy, which the shrewd Amaterasu turned to her advantage. She wanted to extend her rule to the region, and she dispatched one of the sons borne to her in the contest with Susano to assess the situation. After learning of the upheavals there, the Sun Goddess dispatched another son to subdue the region. When this son failed to return after three years, she consulted with her fellow divinities and decided to send a god called Ame-no-waka-hiko to find out what had happened to him. However, Ame-no-waka-hiko turned traitor and, after marrying Okuninushi's daughter, schemed to take control of the land. After eight years Amaterasu sent a divine pheasant to him to ask the reason for his long absence from heaven. Ame-no-waka-hiko shot the bird with an arrow, which passed through it and reached the god Takamimusubi, who sent it straight back: it killed the traitor as he lay in bed.

Exasperated by these failures, Amaterasu sent two of her most trusted divine colleagues, Takamimusubi and Kamimusubi, to inform Okuninushi that he must surrender the land to the Sun Goddess. Seated on the tips of their upturned swords, which had embedded themselves in the crest of a wave just off the beach at Inasa in Izumo, they delivered the Sun Goddess's ultimatum. Okuninushi, much impressed by this display, asked one of his sons for an opinion. The young god advised capitulation, an assessment with which Okuninushi eventually concurred, with the proviso that a place should be reserved for him among the major deities worshipped at Izumo. Amaterasu agreed to this. After Ise (see p.115, margin), Izumo is the most important Shinto shrine.

After Okuninushi's surrender, Amaterasu sent her grandson Honinigi to earth bearing three sacred talismans of sovereignty: the Divine Mirror which had helped to trick Amaterasu into leaving the cave of darkness (see pp.116-7), the Kusanagi sword found by Susano in the tail of the dragon (see p.118), and the *magatama* beads which had produced many offspring (see p.115). Replicas of these talismans are still presented to each new emperor at his enthronement.

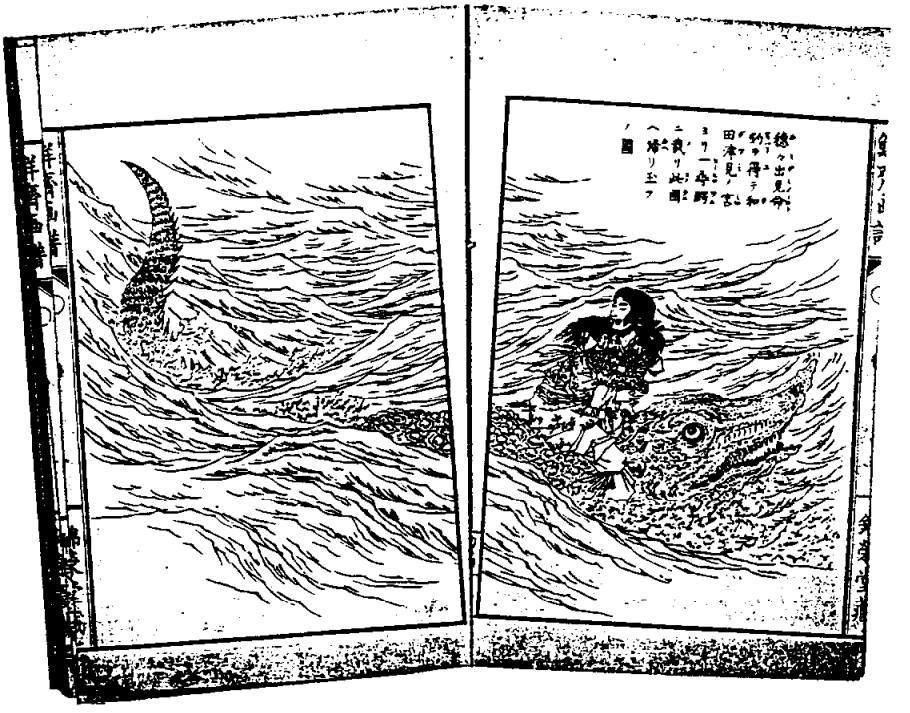
FIRESHINE AND FIRESHADE

Honinigi, the grandson of Amaterasu, had two sons, Honosusori ("Fireshine") and Hiko-hoho-demi ("Fireshade"). Fireshine, the eldest, supported himself by catching sea creatures with his fishhook, while his younger brother, Fireshade, was a landsman who hunted animals. Dissatisfied with his lot, Fireshade proposed that they exchange occupations. They did so, but Fireshade was no more successful in the new role than in the old. To make matters worse, he lost the fishhook and was unable to return it when his brother demanded it back. The hapless former landsman offered several substitute hooks, but only the original would satisfy Fireshine. Deeply embarrassed, Fireshade drifted far out to sea and finally reached the palace of the Sea God, Watatsumi-no-kami. Not only did the god find the missing fishhook, in the mouth of a redfish, but he also gave the newcomer his daughter's hand in marriage.

After several years of living comfortably in his father-in-law's palace, Fireshade began to long for his homeland. As a parting gift, the god gave him two magic jewels: one to make the sea rise and another to make it fall. He also arranged for his son-in-law to ride home on the back of a friendly crocodile.

Fireshade returned the fishhook to Fireshine, but the latter continued to make trouble, and so Fireshade threw the jewel that makes the sea rise into the water, causing his elder brother to panic and beg forgiveness. Thereupon, Fireshade threw the other jewel into the sea. When the water receded, a grateful Fireshine vowed to serve his younger brother forever. Fireshade's grandson was the first Emperor, Jimmu-tenno (see p.122).

This 19th-century print (right) depicts Fireshade riding home on the crocodile.



GODS, HEROES AND DEMONS

Inari, Hachiman and the Oni

The Shinto pantheon includes a number of major divinities not mentioned in the myths summarized so far. One is Inari, the Rice God. Closely related to Ogetsu-no-hime, the Food Goddess (see p.117), Inari is widely venerated not only as the deity who ensures an abundant rice harvest, but also as the patron of general prosperity. As such, he is especially worshipped by merchants. Inari's messenger is the fox, and a pair of these creatures invariably flanks his image at every Inari shrine.

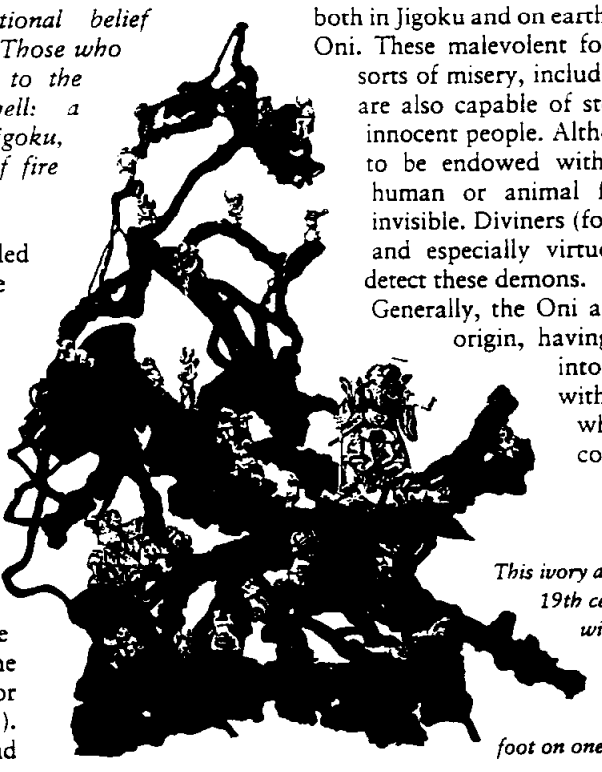
In ancient times, Inari was considered the patron of swordsmiths as well as of merchants and rice farmers. Other popular divinities of this sort include Kamado-no-kami, god of kitchen ranges, and Ebisu, the *kami* who oversees work. Finally, the Shinto pantheon includes a great many deified historical (or quasi-historical) figures. One of the most important is the Emperor Ojin (died *c.*394AD), who was famed for his military exploits and later deified as Hachiman, God of War. It is still customary in many regions for young men to celebrate their coming-of-age ritual (at the age of twenty) at one of the numerous Hachiman shrines.

Demons

Shinto, like other traditional belief systems, has its dark side. Those who have sinned are condemned to the Japanese equivalent of hell: a subterranean realm called Jigoku, consisting of eight regions of fire and eight of ice.

The ruler of Jigoku is called Emma-ho, who judges the souls of male sinners and assigns them to one of the sixteen regions of punishment according to the nature of their misdemeanour. Emma-ho's sister judges female transgressors. As part of the judgment process, the sinner's past sins are reflected back at him in a vast mirror. The souls of the dead can be saved by the intercession of *bosatsu* or Bodhisattvas (see p.123). Another class of demon, found both in Jigoku and on earth, is made up of beings called Oni. These malevolent forces are responsible for all sorts of misery, including disease and famine, and are also capable of stealing souls and possessing innocent people. Although some Oni are believed to be endowed with the facility for assuming human or animal forms, or both, most are invisible. Diviners (for example, *miko*: see p.117) and especially virtuous people can sometimes detect these demons.

Generally, the Oni are thought to be of foreign origin, having possibly been introduced into Japan from China, along with Buddhism – a way of life to which they are sometimes converted.



This ivory and root wood sculpture of the 19th century shows numerous Oni with two warriors who have subdued them, including a figure called Shoki the demon-queller, who stands with his foot on one of the defeated demons.

THE REALM OF SAGA

The exploits of Jimmu-tenno and Yamato-takeru

THE NAMING OF YAMATO-TAKERU

Yamato-takeru, the famous name by which O-usu-no-mikoto was known, means "Brave One of the Yamato". He acquired this name as a young man.

O-usu-no-mikoto's first exploit was to kill his elder brother for not showing proper respect to their imperial father. Impressed by his son's ferocity, the emperor decided to send him off on a dangerous mission to kill two mighty warrior brothers named Kumaso. Disguised as a woman, O-usu managed to insinuate himself into the brothers' palace and was invited to attend a feast. When the festivities were at their height, O-usu suddenly withdrew the sword he had concealed beneath his female garments and stabbed the elder Kumaso through the chest, killing him instantly. The younger Kumaso brother fled in terror, but O-usu managed to catch him and stab him in the buttocks. As the injured man lay dying, he bestowed upon his killer the name by which he would henceforth be known.

Jimmu-tenno sets out on his journey east, to find new lands to rule. The bird-like creature may be a winged being called Sawo-ne-tsu-hiko which guided Jimmu and his brother across the strait which separates Kyushu from Honshu.

One section of the *Kojiki* focusses on the "Age of Men", dominated by heroic quasi-historical figures rather than by gods. The first such figure in the Japanese tradition is Jimmu-tenno (or Kamu-yamato-iware-biko as he was also called), grandson of Fireshade (see p.120) and founder of the imperial family. There is some evidence that he was not in fact the first of the line but had an elder brother, Itsu-se, who was killed in battle during the brothers' move east, to find the best place from which to rule their kingdom, and also to look for new territories. After burying his fallen brother, Jimmu continued eastward into the Kumano region (modern Wakayama Prefecture). Here, a local deity, taking the form of a bear, cast a spell over the invaders which put them into a deep sleep.

Then one of Jimmu's retainers learned in a dream of a magic sword, sent by Amaterasu and her fellow divinities to help Jimmu pacify the central Land of the Reed Plain (that is, Yamato). Awaking, the retainer located the sword and presented it to Jimmu. The army then continued its eastward march, guided by a giant crow sent down by heaven. As the soldiers moved deeper into Honshu, the local rulers paid homage to Jimmu. Finally reaching Yamato, Jimmu built a palace there, married a local princess of divine ancestry (Isuke-yori-hime), and settled down to rule his new realm.

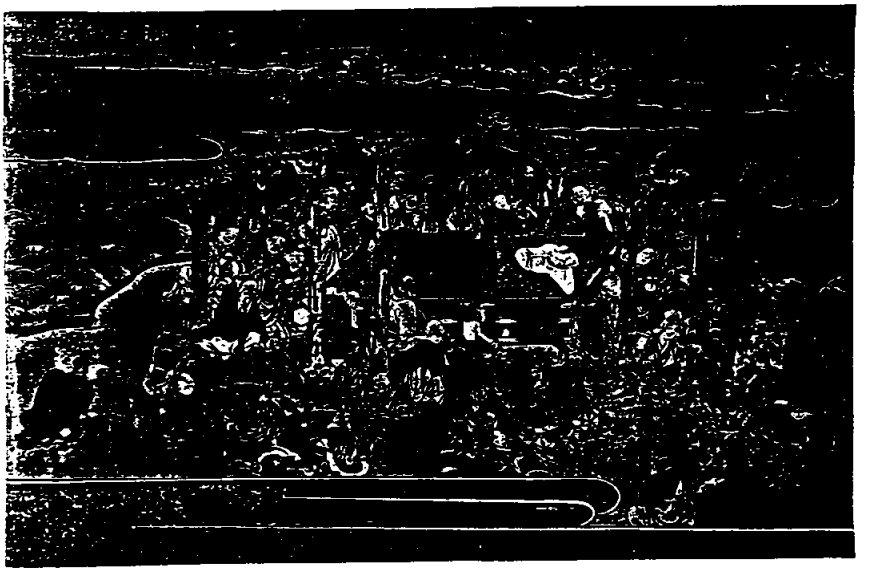
The greatest of all Japanese legendary heroes is Yamato-takeru, originally called O-usu-no-mikoto. After several exploits in his youth, Yamato-takeru was sent by his father, Keiko, to subdue the land of Izumo by killing its chief, Izumo-takeru. This mighty warrior agreed to a duel with Yamato-takeru, and to exchange swords for the fight. When the contest began, Izumo-takeru was unable to draw Yamato's sword (it was not a real sword but an imitation), and so was easily killed.

The next mission assigned to Yamato-takeru by his father was the pacification of the Eastern Barbarians, or Emishi. He set off with the magic Kusanagi sword found by Susano (see p.118) and a magic bag, both given to him by his aunt, Yamato-hime, at the Ise shrine. En route he met a princess, Miyazu-hime, and fell in love with her, promising to marry her on his return. When he arrived in Sagamu (modern Kanagawa province) he was implored by a local chieftain to dispatch an unruly deity who lived in a great pond in the middle of a grassy plain. This was a trick: as soon as he entered the plain the chieftain set fire to the grass. However, the Kusanagi sword then started wielding itself to mow down the blazing grass (hence the name by which this sword was later known: the Grass-Mower). Opening the magic bag, Yamato-takeru found fire-starting equipment, with which he set a counter-fire and escaped from the trap.

It was during the long journey back to his homeland that Yamato-takeru brought about his own downfall. Before settting off he married Miyazu-hime and left the Kusanagi sword in her care. In the pass of Ashigara he killed a mountain deity in the form of a white deer. Later, on Mount Ibuki, he encountered another deity, embodied as a white boar, and violated a taboo by proclaiming that he would kill the creature. Because of these transgressions, he was soon afflicted by a mortal illness. Dying, the hero made his way to the coast at Otsu, near Ise, to collect another sword he had left there. Then, singing a song about the beautiful homeland he would never see again, he proceeded to the plain of Nobo, where he finally died. Before his body could be buried in the tomb erected by the emperor, it transformed itself into a giant white bird which soared off in the direction of Yamato.

BUDDHIST MYTHS

Three figures of mercy



The death of the Buddha, as depicted in a Japanese handscroll of the 17th century. Buddhism developed rapidly in Japan in the 7th and 8th centuries.

The Shinto religion has co-existed with Buddhism for more than 1,500 years in Japan. As a result, there has been a great deal of cross-fertilization between the two faiths, and many Shinto *kami* have long since taken on a Buddhist cast. For example, the god of war, Hachiman, is also referred to as a *bosatsu* – that is, an incarnation of the Buddha (from the Sanskrit *bodhisattva*). The merging of Buddhist and Shinto teachings is often referred to as Ryobu-Shinto, or "Double-Shinto". However, there are also a great many *bosatsu* who have little, if anything, to do with Shinto, and whose roots go back to China and, ultimately, to Buddhism's birthplace in northern India.

Of all the major Buddhist deities, three figures loom especially large in the popular tradition: Amida, Kannon and Jizo. Amida-butsu ("Buddha"), who derives from the Sanskrit figure Amitabha, is a Bodhisattva who voluntarily postponed his own salvation (that is, his entry into Nirvana) until all human beings had been saved. He is the central figure in the "Pure Land" sects (Jodo-shu and Jodo-shinshu), which are grounded on the belief that the faithful, by invoking Amida at the hour of death, are able to be reborn into the beautiful "Pure Land" where they will be free from pain and want until ready for the final Enlightenment.

Kannon, the equivalent of the Chinese Guanyin (see p.96) and the Indian Avalokiteshvara (see p.87), is widely worshipped under several names. He is the *bosatsu* to whom believers turn for mercy and wise counsel. He is at once the protector of children, of women in childbirth and of dead souls. One of his most popular manifestations is Senju Kannon, or the "Kannon of a Thousand Arms" – all of which are stretched out compassionately toward the worshipper. In Japanese iconography he is typically shown with a miniature Amida on his head, as he was seen as the companion of this Buddha.

Jizo is also concerned with children, especially the souls of those who have died. Small Jizo-yas, or temples to Jizo, are ubiquitous in Japan. But he is also the protector of all who suffer pain, and is believed able to redeem souls from hell and bring them back to the Western Paradise.

Kannon, shown here (on a late 19th-century sword-guard) standing on the back of a carp, is sometimes illustrated as a thousand-armed figure, sometimes in other forms (for example, as a seated two-armed figure holding a lotus, or as a horse-headed figure with a third eye). The cult of Kannon was introduced into Japan from Korea shortly after the arrival of Buddhism in the islands.